

E

286

C48

1854



An Oration
by
Ramsay, David
"



Class E 2 . 6

Book . C 4 8

1854

113
ORATION

DELIVERED BEFORE THE

CINCINNATI AND THE '76

ASSOCIATION,

ON THE 4TH JULY, 1854,

BY

DAVID RAMSAY,

OF THE CINCINNATI.

PUBLISHED BY THE SOCIETIES.

CHARLESTON:
HARPER & CALVO, PRINTERS,
NO. 32 CHALMERS-STREET.
1854.

ER86
.C48
1854

1841141

4. B. M. 1510 - 8 - 11

ORATION.

THE rising tides bear a thousand ships to our harbours. Numerous emigrants are sailing hither: some have fled from the memories of their home, outlaws of liberty; some have abandoned a science, they enlarged; some seek the scanty charity of repentance, or ask but the bare alms of life; few are wanderers, to whom the narrow limits of their fancied ark seem other than a larger prison. Land! cries the shipboy from his airy perch. Land! every voice echoes. All are here at land. The exodus of humanity escaping from the ensanguined sea, is arrived where thus much is the promise, liberty and law—freedom outraging no right, government coercing only license. These are hopes which lead on men from every clime, results which closed a weary course, inaugurating a new epoch with the day when for the first time, self-evident truths were successfully proclaimed. Their declaration took place at no

auspicious period. Civilization was reposing after a terrible war, from which conquest and rapine had emerged victorious. Silesia remained in the grasp of the indomitable Frederic; the Crimea was torn from the Ottoman; Poland had been partitioned; the last reverend order was suppressed, which, named in the holiest name of man, had confronted kings. But speedy retribution followed, a new evangile of state was proclaimed, its trumpet sounding from war on land and sea. That clarion blare evoked a contest not merely between the mother country and her revolted colony. Spain armed for the heritage of Castile and Leon; France remembered her Huguenots; Holland had too long combatted for independence to stand neutral. Victory flew before the allied banners. A bristling circle contracted around the foe standing at bay, and soon the bent sail bore the British armies from an unconquerable land, left to its own fates and freedom.

Ever since, that land has had its eleutheria checked with somewhat of the paschal solemnity, befitting progression. The day is truly more honourable, whose celebration looks not altogether backward; for anniversaries, when not significant of advance, are requiems over a people buried in story, even before resolved into oblivion. On the contrary, every real anniversary forms that indistinct boundary of the present, melting on either hand. Surmounted trials with patriotic expectations render it visible and

radiant, as the glowing line arched in air is drawn on the storm, but lit up by beams of a serener day. Thus from experience and hope are gathered feelings which constitute the celebration of national holidays. A continuity of state is then exhibited, from which the national character and tendency can be determined by a comparison of each advance with the direction of all. There is purpose in such view of progress. It seems to be the teaching of the past, that certain tasks are ordained unto nations. To the Jewish stem, we owe religion; to the Grecian, art; to the Roman, law. A reverent parallel of these results may be drawn, widely apart as they are. Belief has not ceased to do homage to the Jewish scripture; intelligence thrills in the contemplation of the embalmed beauty of Grecian mind, and judgment, seeking justice, finds it in the written reason of the Roman jurisprudence.

A corollary of this appointment appears in the fact that each nation passed not away, until its task was completely done. In Greece, when the eloquent tongue was mute, and the exquisite sense dulled, then the truculent Moslem supplanted the last Constantine. So also when the pandectic equity of unrivalled jurists was ordered, the high call was answered, and beneath the tramp of the Hun's war-horse, Italy faded and withered. The same conclusion terminates the noblest mission vouchsafed to man. When the things were come to pass which

prophets, judges, and kings had transmitted, the Hebrew's task was done, but thenceforth he becomes an exile. It is, however, by no means at the conclusion of a career, that the moral is to be discovered. The surest test is retrospective lying in the people's consciousness. In attempting to formularise social phenomena, we immediately perceive that every essential truth of intellectual development received its impetus at a very early age. Certainly in the larger achievements can an original be traced to distant periods. Take law: the broad universal Right is as old as Man. We have derived it through Gothic channels from one source; yet in the very reservoir from which we draw, currents mingle that can be explored far higher. Greece appears through the myth of the twelve tables the coadjutrix of Latin legislation, but her own assessors are replete with Egyptian learning; and even on the banks of the sage Nile, there are memorials guiding us to the awful verge of Sinai. As in law, so in art. Modern and mediæval schools avow their studies of the same immortal masterpieces, but for the models of these we may not linger in Greece. Its perfection is only a repeated lesson, while the very academic stronghold is decorated with captures from the mystic lore of India, and the remoter Asia. This anticipation fails to be recognized in the highest result permitted to instrumentalities of divine Foresight, only still less. Read every creed with an enlightened eye. It is

truth disguised. The gloomy fables of the nursery of our race recounted eternal verities: the poorest pariah looked for the beneficent Avatar. The norseman Scald chaunted the return of the runic Balder. Orphic utterances* foretold the advent of one whose attributes were hymned, as in words of Holy Writ. Uninspired poetry became vaticinian. The traditions of humanity looked for its apotheosis:—but this is matter for other argument. At present it is sufficient to appeal to the invariable repetition of merely natural exploit, to show, (with some degree of probability at least) that there is only an expansion of every truth which is in Time. The stream may be coloured by the skies it flows to, or may urge a lordly flood nearing the illimitable sea, but it is unchanged, the same element as at its source.

Surrender, however, these conclusions from the philosophy of history; reject either the logic or its deductions. It is still impossible to deny the fact of the gradual amelioration of government. It is as impossible to deny the remoteness of this tendency. The medals of creation attest a mysterious progression in the material world: so also in the realm of civilization. Types of former liberty are scattered, like fossils over the present age. The isles of Ulysses preserve a Greek name of liberty; the gorgeous commonwealths of Italy are represented by the oldest republic on earth; the sober, wealthy and puissant

* I do not, of course, mean the neo-platonic forgeries.

Hansa is not totally extinct, the four great merchant cities of northern Europe are yet hanseatic freetowns ; and the green slope of Ruetli is laved to-day by its unsullied lake and guarded by insubjugate Alps, lifting their snowy pinacles into the blue sky domed above a land free now as in the days of Tell.

Antiquity so attested, is simply human nature. Resistance to tyranny is as old as usurpation. Flanders can tell of her *Gueux* ; France of her *Jacquerie* ; Germany of her *Bauernkrieg* ; Italy, Poland, Spain, Hungary,—wherever oppression has been, revolution has followed. By these very disturbances we perceive the gradual advance of Man : for in that line no point can be determined, save by an intersection of the quiet continuous flow.

In this manner, after the upheaval of the middle ages, we follow an almost direct succession of revolutions, from the turmoils of Italy ; which ceasing apparently in the elevation of magnificent families were to cause through their expenditures and necessities, transalpine discords kindling the fires of religious war ; the embers of which went out in the carnage of the thirty years. Principles successful in that dreadful contest created an interregnum in the royalty of England ; during which pause, ideas were transplanted proving the germ of our revolution, that in its turn became the stock of countless recent offshoots.

Through every struggle one eminent principle is growing and strengthening, that government is for the

governed and the best means thereunto, self-government. This is in fact the entire course of universal history: at first the record of families; then of cities; then of nations; and lastly incorporated on a wider scale, of confederacies. In short, government departs more and more from the rule of one or few, to that of many.

This divergence towards union is controlled so as favour liberty. The most superficial examination of national peculiarities in office shows how it is tempered. Thus for example: the teutonic trait of separatism, the very definition of liberty, has kept pace with this federative tendency, in opposition to centralization. It was such sectionalism that garnered in its arctic home was republican before ever the pelasgic or etruscan state-craft, was venerable before Roman secessions, had been forgotten ages anterior to Nullification. It was such influence that bursting southward with the migration of polar hordes, retraced its steps, following their victorious march, instituting the innumerable fiefs of the empire, and as a necessary consequence, a peculiar code, which, demanded by a new social phase, was like that, to terminate in unforeseen franchises.

These ancient ideas moving towards self-government, became at last no longer theories expressed only in defeat, but triumphant realities. The revolution which established them, which digested every principle of freedom however received from divided ages

or countries, that revolution was the one this day commemorates. Even waiving its succession if disputed, it is unquestionable that all that has been since done for liberty is consequential on it. What has followed the revolution of this country? It were impossible to trace the concessions to each stormy demand of 1789, 1813, 1820, 1830 and 1848; but look at the results. South America wholly independent, almost entirely republican. Throughout Western Europe, trial by jury, abolition of the censorship, written constitutions and representative governments.

I know that the pyrrhonist will point to France. Even there is not the contrast of 1789 and 1848 immense? Even there is not her ruler, the citizen monarch? What matters a name? Any title uttered by the voice of the people is republican enough. But let the worst be true. Let beautiful France be betrayed, and let the ship of state go down. As the waves close over the free tri-colour, "live the Republic" will burst from the foam that surges over heroes.* Though France be no more the banner-state of freedom, her martyr-fate may nerve nations yet to issue from the slough of despotism.

Scan the entire horizon. There is no Christian people that does not now possess privileges which were utopian to a generation not quite passed away.

Nor is it solely civilization that responds. The standard of man has been elevated in its most animal

*Le Vengeur, 2nd June, 1794.

appearance. The hardly human African has been rendered a useful denizen of earth, and has attained with us to a higher cultivation than elsewhere, with an admission to personal securities unknown to his barbarous state of nature. Even the utter darkness of his home is penetrated only by our enlightenment; for the glare in Algiers and at the cape is the conflagration of exterminating war. Look farther also to the effete elder Asia. Even there American influence is at work, and taught by its missionary zeal, one-third of the world's inhabitants is learning the force of popular will.

The mighty message of another time has imprinted its traces not only on the stable land, but even on the turbulent deep. There is no sea-rocked isle whose shores have not been pressed by the feet of our bearers of glad tidings. Voices have reached us from nations born in a day, asking admission to our union; the traditional seclusion of an ocean empire has opened to envoys from its youngest compeer in the brotherhood of Man.

All this is virtue which has proceeded from us; but if we use a nearer examination, signs of similar progress are abundant. Republican commerce has girdled earth with its liberal cestus; republican ingenuity has rendered obsolete the former tactics of marine war, and has thus most effectually emancipated the sea from the dominion of that naval isle so

long admiral among nations; republican generosity opens an asylum for pilgrims of every purpose; republican valour makes good the safeguard.

Such is the appearance of our country on this anniversary. National vanity too often indulges in the easy eulogium of self-landation, but it is none such to take this view of progress. Our part is universally recognised whatever cavil be made to its performance. The attributes of commission stand forth in bold outline: the remote prophecies which foretold the appearance of transatlantic fortunate abodes; the coincidences of the discovery which married our virgin country to civilization ripening into vigour; the fatidical idea which accompanies our nation in its very infancy—a circumstance occurring but once before in history; the chain of events which separated our continent from dependance, linking its emancipation to those of the past, as a summary of their principles. All these are lesser indications than the achievements of scarce three score years. If such be not ornate signs of destiny, history must be written again. Its teachings affirm the probability of our mission; and that there is such a task of emancipation to be performed is evidenced by the expectation of the past, and the earnest looking forward of the present: for the dream of republicanism has now gone up before the world, and there is no noble nor unselfish heart that does not throb in unison with its harmony, the

prolusion of that sublime concord which is the song of the new earth—the song of the Liberator and the Redeemer.

It seemed to me that looking upon the international moment of to-day was to occupy its highest standpoint. This morning, the roar of cannon on our long drawn coast, spoke not more loudly to the ocean's thunder than does a multitudinous welcome to the tread and hum of the van of nations sounding on our shore. Dawn could kindle no sublimer symphony.

Nevertheless, error too often guides speculation for me to insist upon any position, I have taken. I am willing to retire from all. This much, however, may be admitted that to-day is one of gratulation to our own people. Years ago I stood on an outlyer of the Harz. Widespread fields lay beneath, through whose verdant and gently undulating surface a river sparkled like a silver thread. Some thirty or forty villages were scattered in the peaceful valley, while the venerable towers of a university town gave dignity to the repose of the scene. But evening drew on, and the landscape lost its brighter hues in the gray tints of twilight, as the sun began slowly to sink behind the opposite mountains. I stood with countrymen, and gazing on that setting sun, we knew that it went to give light to our own land and hailed the omen; that as time to Europe already past, to America was yet to come, so that although all in the aged

hemisphere grew dark and yet more dark, on the young republic would pour an ever waxing glory.

Thoughts such as these suit occasions like to-day's, but there are ghostly emotions which rise at the most festive scenes and will not down. It is true, mankind has advanced; but the epicycle of universal history is generated by the circles within which each individual nation has returned to its starting point. It is true, our short period has been heroic, but its brief annals are sybilline with foreboding. Not one century has envied the federal temple, and storms have rocked it to the base. True, it has withstood that violence and risen grandly and massively in towering proportion; but the inexorable influence may undermine it, which accompanies success: that very ponderous height may be the natural overthrow. It is true, an aurora empurples our western seas; but perchance this rosy light in the reddening west, reflects not the breaking of another, brighter day, and is only that evening glow, which flushes, as if in excess of sorrow over a departing luminary, in whose waning rays the splendour of morn and noon expires. And be it so. When the dying day gathers up its imperial glories, with that superb valediction, fires are disclosed, gleaming in higher heavens; and the stars, that blaze forth, when sunset yields to the illumination of night, are spheres whose choral woke at creation the prelude to a lofty epiphany outshining sun and moon. Thus

be it. If the hopes of humanity are to fade and disappear in this last experiment of man, the shadow that deepens must be one which

“Shall close the drama with the day.”

The unknown hour will then have come, when a perfect and enduring liberty shall steal upon the world in its ultimate Night.

65-2

LIBRARY OF CONGRESS



0 011 782 955 8

